

109 172 134 New program looking for Iowa's Great Places

DES MOINES (AP) — Anita Walker and her team are trying to get Iowans to brag a little.

Everywhere she goes, Walker hears residents talk about how great it is to live in their town or region, whether it's because of a lake, the peaceful countryside, a historical neighborhood or the friendly people.

So, she tells them, why not let everybody else know about it?

That's idea behind the Iowa Great Places initiative, a program that will use the resources of 18 state agencies to help cities or regions showcase their strengths and unique features. The goal is to attract people, which in turn might attract jobs. Or at least draw tourists.

"When you have great places for people to live, they become great places for entrepreneurs to start a business," Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, said during an interview with reporters and editors from The Associated Press. "They become great places for businesses to locate because they know there is an ability to attract a work force."

Walker has been promoting "Great Places" since Gov. Tom Vilsack announced the program in March. A native of Southern California, Walker has found Iowans to be a self-deprecating lot. They're proud of their state, but reluctant to talk it up.

Part of her job has been prodding communities to speak out for themselves by taking part in Great Places.

"There is no shortage of creativity in this state," Walker said. "What we need is confidence."

That became apparent to Walker at a recent meeting for southwest Iowa communities, when participants were asked to describe a great place.

"Every single one of them described the place where they lived," she said. "So it isn't the fact that people can't recognize what's good. I think what's lacking is the confidence to take that and capitalize on it."

That where the Great Places program comes in, an effort Walker describes as one-stop

shopping for help.

It starts with a community, organization or region submitting a proposal to make their area a better place to live. It doesn't have to be a new building or highway improvements. It could be extending a trail, showcasing a scenic byway, a main street business district or a neighborhood of Victorian homes.

Two consultants, called "coaches," then will work with local organizers to determine which state programs could help them.

Do they need a historical preservation tax break or assistance from the Housing Finance Authority? Maybe they need expertise from the Depart-

"That's very creative and might work," said Jacky Adams, a preservationist in Red Oak who attended the southwest Iowa meeting. "They will take care of plugging in people that will help you. I think that will be good. One of the things rural communities lack is personnel. This may fill that gap."

Proposals must be submitted by July 1 and an advisory board will pick three as pilot projects in the fall. A major goal: quick results.

"We mean things that are measurable and clear cut," Walker said. "For

ment of Transportation or Department of Natural Resources. The communities won't have to figure that out. That will be the job of the 40 state employees who are being trained as coaches.

example, a 10 percent increase in housing in the downtown or a connection to a trail that goes around the community to the business district.

"Very specific, clear results on a timeline. And we need them quickly. Since this is our test year, if we don't have success and results, we probably won't have Great Places the next year."

The Great Places team is holding 10 forums around the state to pro-



Ottumwa
Courier
Ottumwa, IA
Circ. 14894
From Page:
2B
6/1/2005
42120



Ottumwa
Courier
Ottumwa, IA
Circ. 14894
From Page:
2B
6/1/2005
42120



mote the
program
and gauge
interest. Walker
has been encouraged
by the turnout —
more than 200 people
attended in Clear Lake
— and hopes that leads
to dozens of proposals.

"I wouldn't be surprised
if it's over 100," she said.

They'll hear from the Bellevue area
for sure, said John Hoff, Chamber of
Commerce president in the Mississip-
pi River city of 2,350. Hoff said the
city wants to promote its appealing
riverside location, proximity to
Dubuque and the Quad Cities and sev-
eral housing developments under con-
struction.

"Anybody who could see the sun-
rise I saw this morning would think
there's no point in looking anyplace
else for a scenic area," Hoff said. "I

think we have the resources, I think
we have the locale to attract people.

"I don't think we're trying to entice
a lot of heavy industry. I don't think
we'd have success. But we've got a
quality of life we don't think a lot of
other people can compare with."

The Legislature appropriated
\$300,000 for the program, money that
will be used to cover the expenses of
the coaches.

But not all the assistance has to be
monetary. The Alcoholic Beverages
Division offered the sides of its trucks
as "moving billboards" to promote the
program. Prison inmates might be
able to perform some of the work.

For Walker, the cooperation among
the state agencies has been as fulfill-
ing as the program itself. Most arrived
at the first meeting looking to protect
their own turf. Then, when asked what
they could contribute to Great Places,
everyone jumped on board, she said.

"I get chills when I think about it,"
Walker said. "It probably was the
most transforming experience I've
seen in my years in state government.
All of a sudden, we had the feeling
that we really could transform com-
munities."

In the months ahead, they'll all find
out how well it works. Walker, whose
energy for the program seems bound-
less, is eager to get it going.

"We can talk and talk and talk and
have dreams and visions, but when's it
going to happen? That's what people
want to know," she said. "Dripping
resources in a little bit, a little bit, to
me that's just torture. Let's just focus,
put what we need on the table and
make something happen."

